ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 11

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Soviet message to reporters

Harassment of Monitor writer seen as part of effort to keep reporters from covering sensitive subjects

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An incident in Leningrad last week involving Gary Thatcher, the Monitor's Moscow correspondent, was a pointed example of the challenges faced by Western reporters in the Soviet Union.

Journalists who have worked in Moscow say that the two-day seizure of journalistic materials belonging to Mr. Thatcher was part of a continuing effort to intimidate foreign reporters and keep them from reporting on subjects the Soviets consider sensitive.

"I think they're trying to convey a message to Gary and other Western correspondents. I think it has to be taken seriously," says Kevin Klose, who was the Washington Post's correspondent in Moscow from 1977 to 1981.

And the Soviets can be very direct in getting their message across to Western correspondents. Recently the Kremlin stepped up its campaign of attacking Western correspondents through articles in the Soviet press. The International Press Institute in London has reported that, since Mikhail Gorbachev came to power on March 11, there has been an unusal spate of such pieces. Among the publications assailed were Newsweek and the New York Times.

Newsweek, in fact, has received special attention from the Soviet authorities. Three of its correspondents have been expelled from the Soviet Union: Whitman Bassow in 1962, just two years after he opened Newsweek's Moscow bureau; John Dornberg in 1970; and Andrew Nagorski in 1982. And Soviet authorities made such sordid personal charges against a fourth, Robert Cullen, that he chose to leave the country for two months.

Mr. Cullen, commenting on why Newsweek has received such treatment, said, "It may be that we're somewhat irreverent, which is a quality that they can't quite understand or tolerate." Cullen finished his stint in Moscow in May.

All Western journalists in Moscow experience daily difficulties in trying to cover the news, which include:

- Restricted access to information. The Soviet news media are heavily censored, government leaders are almost never available for interviews, and the few official spokesmen to be found in Moscow rarely stray beyond what has already been reported by the Soviet news agency Tass.

"I've worked in about 50 countries," says Hedrick Smith, who was a New York Times reporter in Moscow from 1971 to 1974. "There is no country that I've been in that is harder to get information in."

- Soviet monitoring of their travel. Their cars are given special license plates, and trips of more than 25 miles outside Moscow must be cleared with the Foreign Ministry. In addition, many cities are closed to foreign visitors.
- Their living conditions. They are confined to two "ghettos" for foreigners that are guarded by the Soviets 24 hours a day. Since July 15, 1982, the Soviets have required that all calls made by anyone into or out of the country be placed through operators. Reporters must live with the possibility that their mail is read, their telephones tapped, and their offices and apartments bugged and searched.

Daily working conditions are perhaps most difficult for television reporters and their crews.

"TV is a much more obvious target because it's much more visible," says Gene Pell, NBC's Moscow correspondent from 1978 to 1980.

If Soviet officials don't like a particular story, they can delay its broadcast by refusing to give

2

Western correspondents satellite access. When that happens, NBC correspondent Stan Bernard says, a reporter has to arrange for the tape to be carried out of the country by hand. And Mr. Pell, now the director of the Voice of America, recalled that even during satellite transmission of a story to which the Soviets had not objected, "if you tried to inject something that they didn't like, they'd pull the plug."

"It's little petty things that get to you," Mr. Bernard said. For example, he said, the authorities held up the delivery of blank videotape for several months right after Yuri Andropov, the former chief of the Soviet secret police, came to power in November 1982.

Still, Moscow has become a more pleasant place in which to work. "The constraints are far less than they were 10 or 15 years ago," said Mr. Bassow, who is writing a history on US reporters in the Soviet Union called "The Moscow Correspondent."

Perhaps most important, censorship of stories was lifted in 1961 by then-Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

As a result of the Helsinki accords, journalists have been issued multiple-entry visas and thus may enter and leave the country at will, according to Bernard Redmont, dean of the College of Communication at Boston University and a former CBS newsman in Moscow. He adds that since 1978, TV reporters have been allowed to use their own camera crews. Formerly they had to hire Soviet help.

But such gains seem small comfort to journalists working in Moscow today.

"It's one of those places that's very enervating," says NBC's Bernard. "You spend more time fighting the system than getting your work done."